

Review

Nissim Ezekiel: foreshadowing postmodernism

Raj Kumar Mishra

G. I. C. Sultanpur, Pin 228001. U.P. India. E-mail: rajkumarmishra1982@gmail.com.

Accepted 15 May 2014

Nissim Ezekiel despite being a Bene-Israel brought a new era in Indian Writing in English. He confidently carved safe and secure niche among Indian writers writing in English. He is designated variously as 'harbinger of modernism', 'trend-setter' etc. in India. He successfully identified himself with typical Indian thought pattern and culture. Generally Ezekielian scholars feel comfortable showing out modernist tendencies in his writings. But the matter of fact is that he was caught between modernism and postmodernism. On several occasions, he hinted upon his postmodern tending. The available literature on his poetry either focuses on the elements of love, sex, urbanity, irony, satire, or his indianness, perhaps none dared to look into his postmodern tending. My work might prove as a step ahead to the Ezekielian scholarship. My purpose in this paper is to shed sharp lights on the points where Ezekiel tends towards post-modernity.

Key Words: Modernism; postmodernism; post-modernity; urbanity; Ezekiel.

INTRODUCTION

Modernists believe that human existence is threatened, fractured and fragmented. It was once marked by continuity and purpose of life. They crave for order, centre, discipline, and faith which were once intact. Anarchy was not let loose over the world. The sea of faith was up to brim. Moreover they found human existence not in tune with nature inside and outside. Spiritual vacuum swept across. Religiosity loosened hold on people. It even failed providing anchor ship. Hypocrisy flourished and spoiled social relations. Artificiality exhausted spirituality. These are the concerns where modernists being helpless, hopeless, mourn. They want to restore the lost order and faith. In short, modern writing is characterized by loss of faith, fragmentation, and isolation of an individual. No unity, no centre. Modernism inheres lamentation for a lost sense of purpose, a lost coherence, and a system of values' (Barry, 1999: 85).

The term 'postmodernism' is much broader term as it encompasses a wide variety of disciplines of study including art, architecture, music, film, literature, fashion, technology etc. in relation to literary studies, it refers to

certain radically experimental works produced after the second World War. It refers to a way of life, a way of feeling, and a state of mind. Much of 'postmodernist' writing highlights alienating individuals, and meaninglessness of human existence in calm and cool style. Postmodernists celebrate such discrepancies. They don't look for continuity. They have signed the agreement. They don't complain against such things. Disintegration is the concern of modernist and postmodernist studies both, but postmodernists celebrate the absence of a fixed value system whereas modernists mourn it. Postmodernism endeavors to de-centre, whereas modernism is desperate to hold on to centre. Jacques Derrida, Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard are prominent figures in 'postmodern' line-up.

Jacques Derrida, noted French philosopher and thinker challenged entire Western philosophy and its modus operandi. He is generally known as the originator and founder of 'deconstructive' reading and practice. But his way of thinking and reasoning brought radical changes, and paved way for a number of theories and critical

schools. He vehemently discredited any kind of faith in purity, fixity, stability, unity truth, knowledge, identity. To him, only God is perfect if exists. In fact he rationalized the way of thinking. Nothing is an islandic entity. He showed inherent conflicting potentials in everything. To him everything is imperfect and unfinished project. We only look for traces and feel happy. Derrida writes on the imperfectness as the defining character of anything. As he writes:

Nothing is complete by itself; it can only become complete through what it lacks. But what every particular thing lacks is infinite; we cannot know in advance what complement it 'calls for'.... A difference such is the radical nature of course (Derrida,1972: 337).

The term 'postmodernism' was firstly used in the 30s of twentieth century but it gained currency only with the publication of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). According to him, 'postmodernism' simply means 'incredulity towards meta-narratives'. As such the best we can hope for is a series of 'mini-narratives' which are provisional, temporary, and meant for particular local circumstances. In this sense, 'postmodernism' is a project liberating humanity. Hence, cartoons, pop art, and television became acceptable for 'postmodernist' artistic expression. Jean Baudrillard made his entry into 'postmodernism' by his work *Simulations* (1981). For him, it is constituted 'of disparate fragmentary experiences and images that constantly bombard the individual in music, video, television, advertising and other forms of electronic media. The speed and ease of reproduction of these images mean that they exist only as image, devoid of depth, coherence, and originality'. To simplify, 'postmodern' world is not a real rather virtual world. The distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth is blurred. The result is a culture of 'hyperreality'. The outward sign is no more an index of inward reality. Nothing is pure and absolute. Everything is in a state of flux. Disneyland appears the perfect metaphor for 'postmodern' condition. Postmodernists reject any claim to universality, truth, reason, and stability. Postmodernists think globally but prefer to act locally.

Nissim Ezekiel, one of the firmly established Indian poets of post-Independence era, was born on 16th December 1924 to an orthodox Bene-Israel Jewish family near the Byculla Bridge in Bombay. He died of Alzheimer on 9th January 2004. His parents were solely devoted to art, culture, and education. They exerted greater impact on his sensibility. Philosophy and Literature have been his hobby-horse. Ezekiel studied Plato, Aristotle, and some existentialists under the supervision of well-famed philosopher C.E.M. Joad at Birbeck College, affiliated to London University during the year 1950 to 1951.

Nissim Ezekiel's poetic oeuvre is mainly centered on three elements- erotic, realistic, and humanistic. In fact, he continuously evolved and modified his poetic vision and creation. He all through his career sought to bring about harmony in life. It has been since ever his poetic credo. In early phase of poetic output, he is mainly occupied with man-woman relationship. He disarmingly talks of love and sex. Poem after poem he stresses on the idea of physical union, but never indulges in the glorification of it. He believes in the consummation of love. Through it peace and happiness can be enjoyed. He prefers love in its practical sense divested of all sorts of sentimentality. He disapproves blind love altogether. He likes to see both sexes on a par because he knows the fact that one remains incomplete in absentia of other.

Nissim Ezekiel's anti-modernist attitude finds expression in a poem composed long back titled "The Double Horror". In it he finds his life alongside other modern fellows reduced to-

Newspapers, cinemas, radio features, speeches
Demanding peace by men with grim warlike
faces,
Posters selling health and happiness in bottles,
... ..
Holidays in Rome for writing praise of
toothpastes, (CP 7)

Ezekiel in his some poems emerges as a poet of province. His global thinking in local context draws critics to relate him with 'postmodernism'. John Press sheds light on a poet's provincial status in the following words:

. . . who is primarily concerned with the values of
his own cultural society, and who is largely
indifferent to what lies beyond the world that he
knows firsthand. Thus, he cares very little for the
poetry and the civilization of the other ages and
other countries. . . (Day,1987: 85).

Ezekiel in his few urban poems doesn't transcend the limits of Bombay. Ezekiel does not complain against his adopted place. He is entirely opposed to V.S. Naipaul. He is popular as Bombayite poet. He in "Background, Casually" expresses his commitment:

I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to say where I am,
... ..
My backward place is where I am.
(CP 181)

In the beginning, Ezekiel looks for release from conscripting aura of city but later on identify with it and reconcile with feeling ease and comfort. "A Morning Walk" published in the volume *The Unfinished Man*

(1960) deals with Bombay city and its corrupt and disgusting atmosphere. It is one of Ezekiel's typical realistic poems. In the very first stanza, the city is described as "cold and dim/ where only human hands sell cheap". It is looking almost like that of a pile of garbage near the roadside. Even sun, sky, and moon make the narrator feel sluggish. The narrator poses question:

Why had it given him no light,
His native place he could not shun,
The marsh where things what they seem?
(C119)

The squalor, chaos and dirt are conveyed by the image of 'marsh'. And the irony in the second line suggests that all possible way-outs are closed up to him. In the third stanza the poet sees the city as a living hell:

Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
Processions led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes,
And child-like masses, many tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs.
(C119)

The above reference suggests utter gloom and poverty prevalent in the city. To the poet trees look like ghosts:

The more he stared the less he saw
Among the individual trees. (CP
119)

And immediately the poet asks himself whether he has done anything of worth and value, or just passed his time and life. According to the poet, the city life constricts man's personality. Here the will of a man grows weaker like the morning dew; and his past appears as a muddy pool. It all suggests that everything is here dull and insipid. In fact the entire poem is poet's sense of frustration representing the whole generation.

"In India" published in the volume *The Exact Name* (1965) presents several pictures of disgust and revulsion adding "upto a haunting urban picture of societal doom and individual depravity"(Nair, 1989: 123). Ezekiel frankly focuses on poverty, misery, squalor, and the wretchedness suffered by poor people in a city like Bombay:

Here among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums,
Dead souls of men and gods,
Burnt-out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child

And tortured animal,
All in noisy silence
Suffering the place and time, (CP
131)

In "Island" Ezekiel describes city as an island of 'slums and skyscrapers'. He finds city burning as passion burns in the heart of lovers. In fact he sees India through eyes of Bombay. People living in cities cannot escape and are bound to stay here alongside all mishaps of life. Ezekiel writes:

Unsuitable for song as well as sense,
the island flowers into slums
and skyscrapers reflecting
precisely the growth of my mind
I am here to find my way in it (CP
182)

In the poem "Urban", the poet juxtaposes defiled city and with that of pure nature:

The hills are always far away.
He knows the broken roads, and moves
In circles tracked within his head.
Before he walks and has his say,
The river which he claims he loves
Is dry, and all the winds lie dead.

... ..

The city like a passion burns.
He dreams of morning walks, alone,
And floating on a wave of sand.
But still his mind its traffic turns
A way from beach and tree and stone
To kindred clamour close at hand.
(C117)

John Thieme is to say, "Ezekiel's deployment of the trope of the city in later volumes remains textualized, but in more complex and less derivative ways, and by the time he wrote *The Unfinished Man* (1960), in which 'Urban' appeared, he had moved beyond a Modernist, London-centred version of the city toward a more local, if equally metaphorical representation" (CP xxiv). Despite all these malpractices prevalent in the cities, the poet doesn't condemn instead makes adjustment. He knows very well that 'home is where we have to earn our grace' (CP 118). His non-condemnatory tone anticipates 'postmodernism'.

Postmodernist eyes look globally but act upon local matters. They travel from global to local. In the poem "London", Ezekiel recalls his 'basement room' in London. He writes:

Sometimes I think I'm still

in that basement,
 a permanent and proud
 metaphor of struggle
 for and against the same
 creative, self-destructive self. (CP
 199)

“Hymns in Darkness” ridicules common weaknesses of modern man and modern value systems. Here, irony operates with double vision. In the poem, the poet not only targets modern man but himself also. He exposes self-deception and self-esteem of self-centered modern man by the use of irony. The first stanza describes some weaknesses shared by all modern mankind. According to the poet, there is no connection between the ideal and the real aspect of modern man’s life. The modern man speaks a lot about the virtue called ‘humility’ but seldom practices it himself. It is the first casualty with the modern man. The modern man pretends to be thoughtful and intellectual, but unfortunately, this bargain proved him harmful:

He has exchanged the wisdom of youthfulness
 for the follies of maturity.
 What is lost is certain, what is gained
 of dubious value. (CP 217)

The modern man feels glorified in “self-esteem” but it has interrupted his natural growth. He doesn’t know how to be an ego-free person; otherwise he has been a happy creature. The modern man is burning like his own passion. His state of mind and spirit is compared by the poet to the hustle-bustle of the city. As the matter of fact, he does not know himself adequately. “All truths are outside him” so he remains mere a bundle of ignorances that “mock his activity”. He doesn’t know in real sense what he is doing.

In the second section, the poet argues that the self-deception is the eloquent of modern human being. He lives in perpetual self-deception. To be “undeceived” is almost impossible. No immediate redemption looks in sight. The modern man has discovered too many things and with that he has come in the state of utter confusion. He is unable to identify a thing and its proper use. He has “too many keys that unlock no locks”. More knowledge, more confusion. He lives in the mechanical world where desires are satisfied artificially. On its outlook, it seems fanciful but it has, of course, deprived him of his youthfulness. The modern man speaks always keeping truth and falsehood side by side. His truth cannot remain uncontaminated. The modern man always wants to be a leader. He only believes in being heard by the others. He views others with the eye of suspicion, the eye “in the centre of his forehead”. Such selfish nature of the modern man has rendered him a tiny creature, ‘a puny self’. This man always wants to exploit all powers of nature (both

latent and manifest) for his betterment and advancement. He is quite regardless of other creatures living in the world. In this battle of exploitation, his all attempts get foiled each time. But, still he boasts of his knowledge and as such remains “self-deceived” throughout life. This all shows that outward face is not an index of inward content. This is his ‘postmodern’ outlook.

“Night of the Scorpion”, widely anthologized and written in mid-January 1964; reveals a fact that a scorpion has bitten the toe of the poet’s mother on a dark and rainy night. Ten hours incessant downpour led the scorpion to come out of his hiding ‘sack of rice’ to discharge poison. After discharging, it ‘risked the rain again’. Then, peasants in multitude came and chanted the name of God hundred times to paralyze the effect of the poison. They think scorpion as an evil entity. They even searched for the scorpion to kill it but they could not succeed. They believe that the poison will run into the victim’s blood in sync with the scorpion’s movement. Out of the frustration, ‘they clicked their tongues’. They also believe that the suffering of the victim may purify the victim’s flesh of desire and misfortunes ‘of your next birth’.

The rain is still unabated. Many more people, neighbours continue to come with their lanterns and candles attracting more insects. But mother is writhing and groaning with agony in the centre. The rational and sceptic father tries ‘powder, mixture, herb and hybrid’. He even burns her toe with paraffin. The son (poet) watches all this but proved worthless. It is common knowledge that scorpion poison lasts ‘after twenty hours’ on its own whether treated or not.

The last three lines of the poem are opposite to the rest. The peasants were busy in moaning and trying every solution to provide comfort but her main concern was not for herself rather it was for her baby:

My mother only said:
 Thank God the scorpion picked on me
 and spared my children.
 (CP131)

These lines are true tribute to the self-sacrificing Indian mother. This is typical local perspective.

In “The Truth about the Floods”, the poet directs irony against slow officers who are only interested in collecting ‘statistics of the relief work’ instead of taking effective relief measures of flood-affected villagers. For students and newspaper correspondents, flood-affected people are mere source of recreation. They go to the site and distribute biscuits among boys and take their photographs. Indifferent government officials blame nature:

The district authorities
 at Balasore

admitted they had failed,
but they claimed they could not have done
better.
Nature, they said,
had conspired against them. (CP
188)

In this way so many poems can be cited in support of Ezekiel's 'glocalism'. He never lost his individuality. He always authenticated his poems by adhering to typical Indian thought pattern and culture. He writes of common people and problems. In the poem "Ganga" the first few lines focus on the shams of society. We often claim that we are kind enough towards our servants. But it turns out quite wrong as we hear the pathetic saga of Ganga:

She always gets
a cup of tea
preserved for her
from the previous evening
and a chapatti, stale
but in good condition.
Once a year, an old
sari, and a blouse
for which we could
easily exchange a plate
or a cup and saucer.
(CP 202)

These are few instances in support of Ezekiel's emphasis on 'mini-narratives'. As such, he ensured his individuality. And moreover, in these poems Ezekiel used irony boldly.

A typical 'postmodern' litterateur always seeks to reach maximum number of readers. He remains reader oriented. Ezekiel too feels audience/reader consciousness and communicative efficacy as the hallmarks of true and great poetry. He disapproves obscurity found generally in modern poetry. His anti-modern attitude faintly focuses on 'postmodern' tending. In the poem "A Time to Change" he writes:

The pure invention or the perfect poem,
Precise communication of a thought,
Love reciprocated to a quiver,
Flawless doctrines, certainty of God,
These are merely dreams; but I am human
And must testify to what they mean. (emphasis
added) (CP 5)

Perhaps this was the reason why he had discredited Aurobindo's masterpiece *Savitri*. He found it "embarrassingly bad: dated in language, emotionally inflated to the point of grotesqueness and confused of idea.... In my opinion anyone who thinks highly of Sri Aurobindo has no feeling for the English language" (The Times of India). He discards all sorts of obscurity. The

poet should aim at simple, unaffected expressions shorn of all pretensions for conveying poetic emotions. The work of art must not be made vague, verbose, and full of abstractions. This tending glimpses on his 'postmodern' look. Shelley had very little reader consciousness, and often got his readers entangled into abstractions. This is not with Nissim Ezekiel.

In "Jamini Roy", Ezekiel suggests that Jamini the artist gets successful when he turns to folk art and develops folk style. Thus, he reaches maximum number of readers. Ezekiel writes:

He started with a different style,
He travelled, so he found his roots.
His rage became a quite smile
Prolific in its proper fruits. (CP
126)

Ezekiel prefers controlled flow of thought and poetic rationale in place of surrealist eruption and trance-like skill.

Ezekiel's 'view of character is more postmodern than modern; his poems are peopled by figures that defy simple classification' (CP xxviii). His poetic persona is always in progress what he calls in Yeatsian term 'unfinished man'. John Thieme argues, 'though, Ezekiel's persona resists Modernist categorization, because while he shares Modernism's preoccupation with subjective mental states and the alienation induced by urban experience, he resists any unitary representations of subjectivity' (CP xxviii). In his poetic oeuvre, Ezekiel himself playfully takes on various roles like an observer, lover, pursuer, deceiver etc. Miss Pushpa, the Professor, the teacher, the Railway Clerk, Guru, Ganga, Dhanya etc. symbolize different aspects of personality. Actually, like other postmodernists he believes in selves not in singular self. In the poem "Progress" Ezekiel's poetic persona focuses on changeable nature of character:

The former suffering
self declined the use
of women who were
willing but unlovable:
Love was high-minded, stable.

Now he wears a thicker
skin, upgraded from
the goddesses of virtue
to mocking, sexual eyes
whose hunger makes him wise.
(CP 141)

Parody, pastiche, irony, satire, etc. have been favourite tools in the hands of postmodernists. Among these irony has been very dear to Ezekiel. He used it to show out shams and hollowness of the individual and collectives.

Nissim Ezekiel in poems like “Very Indian Poems in Indian English”, “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.” etc. becomes a parodist and ironist. He employed to misshape English language (Standard). His ‘Indian English’ poems are remarkable because they reflect typical cross-cultural situation. The English used in these poems is certainly one of the varieties of English (Standard). This new form of English is alien to foreigners but Indians are at ease.

In “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.”, Ezekiel uses rambling pointless monologue. The farewell address begins in eulogy, but in middle lapses into a detail about the speaker’s tour to Surat:

Her father was renowned advocate
in Bulsar or Surat,
I am not remembering now which place.

Surat? Ah, yes,
Once only I stayed in Surat
with family members (CP 190)

Such aberrations certainly lend informal touch to the speech, but it is difficult to sense by the norms and limits of Standard English. Such speech rhythm and tempo is typically Indian. In ‘Indian English’ poems, Ezekiel tries to capture the very flavour of common Indian speech by changing the Standard English syntax to suit the indigenous speech. Thoughts in these poems are directly translated into English from common Indian speech –

In India also
We are keeping up. Our progress is progressing.
Old values are going, new values are coming.
Everything is happening with leaps and bounds.
(CP 239)

In ‘Indian English’ poems, Ezekiel uses continuous form of tense unnecessarily which is not valid in Standard English but Indian users frequently violate. For example –

“I am standing for peace”
“I am simply not understanding”.

“I am always always appreciating the good spirit”.

“You are all knowing”

“I am not remembering”

Ezekiel employed Hindi and Urdu words like ‘burkha’ (*How the English Lessons Ended*) ‘Chapati’, ‘paan’ (*Ganga*), ‘mantra’, ‘kundalini’, ‘shakti’, ‘bhikshuks’ (*Rural Suite*) etc. to nurture his pidgin English or Babu English. Such aberrations from the Standard English are decisive points to be called Indian English.

CONCLUSION

To the conclusion, it can be said that Nissim Ezekiel successfully captured the mood and aura of post-world wars, and post-Independence period in India. His poems look and dive into the streams of past, present, and future in quick succession. No doubt, it seems a little presumptuous to declare him a ‘postmodernist’ but faintly and slyly, his poems absorbed ‘postmodern’ traits. Plurality in art and artistry is common. He didn’t adhere to one mode or one tendency. He playfully exploited multiple modes. On three or four counts- provincialism, treatment of ‘mini-narratives’, reader consciousness, and typical use of irony and parody, loosely associate him with ‘postmodernism’.

REFERENCES

- Barry P (1999). *Beginning theory: an introduction to literary and cultural theory*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999 (First Indian Reprint).
- Derrida J (1972). *La dissémination*. Paris: éditions du Seuil, 1972.
- Day R (1987). *Larkin*. Philadelphia: Open UP, 1987.
- Ezekiel N (1989). *Collected Poems*. New Delhi: OUP, 1989, second edition 2005. In the body of text it is referred to as CP.
- Nair KP (1989). Ramachandran. “Nissim Ezekiel’s Bombay” in *Perspectives on Nissim Ezekiel*, ed. Suresh Chandra Dwivedi, Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, 1989.